



**Accelerated two-year degrees in the UK: potential impact on student mental health**

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Abstract

Purpose

This policy analysis paper examines the ramifications of accelerated two-year degrees for student mental health. Since it was legislated in early 2019 in the UK, there has been limited debate in academia and among policymakers about the potential viability and risks of the compressed degree programmes.

Design/methodology/approach

The article is based on an analysis of various academic and practitioner viewpoints as well as theoretical perspectives.

Findings

The article found a mixed reception of the compressed degree programme among the academic and practitioner communities. In addition to apprehensions about the quality of education, there are concerns raised about the impact of the pressure deriving from the workload of the accelerated degree. Our assessment considers a potential increase in stress and other more acute state of mental health degradation among students, especially international students, as well as students with families.

Originality/value

This policy analysis paper makes a significant contribution to the debate on the issue of two-year degrees that has not attracted academic scrutiny commensurate with its importance. We conclude that two-year degrees will have far-reaching ramifications, locally and internationally as the UK continues to push for its widening participation agenda as well as maintain its position as one of the top three destinations for international students. We suggest that wider discussions with stakeholder and some impact studies are needed before the accelerated degrees are further popularised in universities.

Key words: Accelerated degree; student mental health; stress; higher education.

## Introduction

The government's introduction of the two-year degree programme has received a mixed reaction from practitioners in higher education. It has instituted a shorter degree, also termed accelerated degree as the House of Lords approved the proposal in January 2019 (Sellgren, 2019). This will take the standard three-year degrees to two years. The shortened degree currently is not intended to replace traditional three-year programmes (Pollard et al., 2017). However, the Government's strong push for it could indicate that the new scheme could be widespread in the future and most students could be coerced into taking these programmes (see DoE's impact assessment report 2018). For the Government, the new degrees would save students a whole year of tuition fees (currently around £9000 annually) plus maintenance costs (Coughlan, 2018). Students in State higher education institutions in England have paid tuition fees for the past two decades. Debate about the compressed degrees can therefore not be divorced from the tuition fee context. Critics of tuition fees in higher education contend that fees reinforce elitism as well as the exclusion of disadvantaged groups (Coughlan, 2017; Callender, 2006). These criticisms have led the British government to legislate for a shorter degree, i.e. moving from the traditional three-year degree to two-year degrees, which is intended to make financial savings for students and parents. This is also a move to increase participation, particularly among the most disadvantaged groups, e.g. minorities and people on lower income. Since legislation passed in 2019, little debate has occurred, and the silence of academics has been particularly striking.

Proponents of the two-year compressed degrees such as Sir Anthony Seldon, vice-chancellor at Buckingham University, agree with the cost-saving element and the flexibility the proposed two-year degrees will offer mature students. Sir Anthony Seldon and Buckingham University have been running such shorter degrees for almost four decades and have the experience. There is some evidence in support of accelerated degrees. The main advantage outside cost saving centres on providing flexible option (Barnett, 2014; Moore et al., 2013). However, some academics and practitioners are concerned about issues related to student mental well-being as well as the widening participation agenda (Lyonette et al., 2015). This article examines a key question: what are the possible limitations of the recently introduced scheme in terms of its implications for student mental health and education?

**Perspectives on the proposed accelerated degree in the UK**

There is a growing body of evidence that links pressured studies to increasing mental health issues among students (Batchelor et al., 2019; Slavin, Schindler & Chibnall, 2014; Castillo & Schwartz, 2013). This issue is not associated with one country but is a worldwide issue. In the UK, however, a growing number of voices oppose compressing the current three years into two for a full degree programme. The main rationale for the opposition to the proposed scheme centres on the potentially higher level of stress and anxiety that the compressed shorter programmes will cause to students and two-year degrees may not resolve the issues of inequalities in education through cost-saving. In fact, Connor et al. (2001) found that the social gap in higher education has deeper causes than cost because inequalities in the system predates the introduction of tuition fees. Equally, the widening participation agenda (aimed at attracting students from poorer backgrounds to higher education) has stalled; the government’s report shows that while the progression rate of pupils on free school meals (FSM) has increased, the gap between FSM and non-FSM has not changed.

Our perspective is closely aligned with the sceptics. Even with the current three-year programmes, there have been several reports (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Brown, 2016; Poh Keong et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2004; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010) in recent years warning of the high level of mental health issues students are developing, including stress, depression and acute anxieties, substance misuse and panic attacks. These are damaging to the students’ wellbeing and performance (Batchelor et al., 2019). Universities and higher education colleges do not always have the level of resources required to deal with these serious issues.

The pressure deriving from completing any programme in two-thirds of the normal time could significantly increase the prevalence of mental illness among students. Another issue that opponents of the proposed scheme see is the level of preparedness of universities that currently run the traditional degree format. With government funding cuts, it is difficult to see where the funds will come from to enable higher education institutions to adjust their systems and human resources to accommodate the new degree framework. In order to implement such a system, the government will need to fund the setting-up cost which could run into millions of pounds. Failing to do this could affect quality in higher education and the student experience, at least in the short – or even medium term. There is also the perspective voiced by many opponents that the two-year degree commodifies education (McDuff, 2017). In addition, the initiators of

the shortened degree have not provided rationale suggesting any urgency in exposing some young people prematurely to working life and sending masses of graduates into the economic system in short spells of time.

### **Student groups most affected by mental health issues**

In this section we examine the possible impact of shortened degree on two groups of students who may be particularly at risk of developing mental health issues as a result of a compressed degree programme. This is linked to the reality that compressing a three-year programme in two years will undeniably cause the students to experience work pressure and burnout which, in turn, have dramatic consequences on student attainment and wellbeing (Margrove, Gustowska & Grove, 2014; Carney, McNeish & McColl, 2005). In a study of the predictors of non-attendance among undergraduates, Oldfield et al. (2018) found that several factors contributed to students missing classes; such factors include “lower sense of belongingness to university, working more hours in paid employment, having more social life commitments, facing tighter coursework deadlines and experiencing mental health issues” (p.509). Academic drivers, social and cultural pressure are amongst the factors that may increase mental distress (Clarke, Mikulenaite & De Pury, 2010). The pressure caused by compressed degrees could also lead students to confine themselves to loneliness which increases mental illness in students, e.g. stress, depression and anxieties (Richardson, Elliott & Roberts, 2017) and homesickness for those away from home (Hack-Polay, 2012).

The circumstances of some groups of students make them particularly vulnerable to mental health issues; international students, and students with families are among these groups.

#### *International Students*

One of the main challenges when talking about compressing the three-year degree into two years is the impact of this on international students for whom English is not the first language. The UK and many leading international education providing countries such as the US, Australia and Canada receive large numbers of international students every year. The UK is the second most popular study destination worldwide with over 458,490 foreign students attending university in the UK yearly (Study in UK, 2019). A compressed degree may be appealing to an increased number of international students who would save on the overall cost

of their education. In fact, a shorter stay in the UK would mean a year or more saving in accommodation and maintenance costs. However, there are critical constraints, (e.g. unfamiliarity with new systems, difficulties in cultural communication, limited social support and interpreting complex language texts) that can lead international students to develop mental health issues. Such students whose first language is not English are usually under intense pressure to assimilate more rapidly the information being taught, and compressed degrees can exacerbate their anxieties. These students would spend more non-classroom contact time attempting to decipher complex information, thus exposing themselves to unacceptable levels of stress.

A major expansion of accelerated degrees can aggravate these trends. While mostly international students deciding to pursue the shortened degree will experience the extra added anxiety, we have made the case that even in the current 3-year degree, international students have issues with extra workload because they take longer to decipher learning materials.

Another associated consequence of such seclusion concerns the difficulty with socialising with fellow international students and with locals, thus inhibiting their ability to learn the new culture, which is a significant reason for venturing abroad to receive international education. Yu & Wright (2015) found that international students' satisfaction and performance is largely contingent upon socio-cultural adaptation and mixing with other students. If accelerated degrees are set to consume valuable socialising time for international students, then socio-cultural adaptation could be significantly hampered. Fallows & Symon (1999) and Barnett (2014) support this perspective when they argue that accelerated degrees can diminish the educational experience, including the development of additional wider interest.

In the past few years, the mental well-being of international students has been widely debated. Pressure deriving from compressed degrees can compound critical issues already facing international students, e.g. the challenges of acculturative stress (Nailevna, 2017; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Hilarios et al., 2015), homesickness (Hack-Polay, 2012), workload and lack of sleep (Oldfield et al. 2018; Kosheleva, Amarnor & Chernobilsky, 2015). The catalogue of psychological issues suffered by international students whose first language is not English denotes that their mental wellbeing worsens with increased study pressure.

*Single parent students and students with families*

The widening participation agenda of the 1990s (to date) increased the diversity of the student population, not just in terms of gender and ethnicity, but also in terms of socio-economic and educational backgrounds (Lyonette et al., 2015). The past two decades have seen a significant increase in the number of students who have family responsibilities (Institute for Women Policy Research - IWPR, 2017), e.g. single parents, married students with dependent children or adults with care needs. Home or family responsibilities are stressful in themselves and if increased pressure from accelerated degree studies are added, we anticipate an increase in mental health breakdown among single parent students. Collins, Coffey & Morris (2010) found evidence that students with family commitment were particularly at risk of burnout. Theodoritsi, Daliana & Antoniou (2018: 77) argue that “Single parent, especially single mothers seem to experience increased level of anxiety and depression, face more socioeconomic difficulties and lack of social support as compared to married couple families”. The ensuing consequences of these mental health issues are far-reaching, including relationship breakdown, withdrawal from course of study and disengagement with social life and professional development (Shenoy, Lee & Trieu, 2016). Further research supports this view, confirming that graduate study places heavy emotional and financial strain on relationships particularly for women (IWPR, 2017; Gold, 2006). According to Gold, there is a relationship between anxiety concerning those marital dynamics and student’s report of depression. If these issues are not resolved, then the situation will ineluctably lead to further weaknesses in the widening participation agenda and diminish the strides made in the past two decades (Lyonette et al., 2015) in the search for equal opportunities and access to higher education.

### **Mitigating mental health issues under compressed degrees: a role for the wider post compulsory education sector**

Margrove, Gustowska & Grove (2014) contend that there are increasing mental health concerns in higher education. An important proportion (63%) of university staff surveyed by the authors confirmed that they had provided mental health assistance to psychologically distressed students. If the two-year degree provision is to be widened despite reservations by many, there must be a rethinking of the post-16 education system and identify the role that the further education (FE) and the wider post compulsory education sector could play. FE and sixth form colleges have abundant expertise in preparing students for higher education. Thus, it is possible to look beyond the universities to assess how other institutions could contribute to making the



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two-year degree a less straining experience for the students. An option that can be envisaged is to allow part of the FE and sixth form curriculum to be reformed or upgraded in a way that, while completing their access to higher education courses, students could be involved in higher level endeavours that could capture some aspects of the first year of university (level 5). Granting credits for such learning will enable the students to operate at level 5 and progress to level 6 to complete their degree without overworking themselves with the risk of long-term or permanent mental health damage.

Another possibility is to make it possible for sixth formers to take one or two of their A level subjects in year 12, since most institutions no longer offer the Advanced Supplement (AS) qualifications. That would mean that the students will engage in higher level learning in year 13 at the same time as taking their final A level course. These proposals are geared at spreading the first year of university education within the wider post-compulsory educational system – as opposed to a concentration of the issues at one end of the educational spectrum. We believe that such an approach could lessen the mental health cost to the students, in addition to the financial benefits that appears to be the government’s central argument for proposing two-year degrees.

As a key premise of the accelerated degree is the pledge to reduce cost to the students, the scheme requires consideration of the place of accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL). APEL entails that students’ non-study experiences which have equipped them with some testable understanding and skills **should** be recognised. For example, part time work or voluntary activities that provide understanding and skills in areas such as leadership, customer service, social responsibilities, to name a few, could be credited to the learners if these activities are well documented. This will mean removing the need for overlap between what the students already know and what they are to learn. Advances in information technology and the internet have made a body of information available which allows students to access some of the knowledge traditionally gained predominantly in higher education.

Barrable, Papadatou-Pastou & Tzotzoli (2018) advocate increase in university services to deal with mental health issues among HE students. The authors note that in the past two decades, there have been important spending cuts in student wellbeing services across universities. This



has contributed to the institutions' inability to detect and address mental health difficulties early (Brown, 2016; Marshall & Morris, 2011; De Pillis & De Pillis, 2001).

## Conclusion

The evidence available that substantiates the critical issues associated with accelerated degrees cannot be ignored by government and policymakers when considering the future of higher education (HE). Compressing a three year-degree into two years can cause certain groups of learners to develop critical mental health issues. Mental distress could cause irreparable damage to students, e.g. non-attendance and non-completion (Oldfield et al., 2018), substance misuse (Richardson, Elliott & Roberts, 2017), suicide (Coon & Mitterer, 2006), and family breakdown (Margrove, Gustowska & Grove, 2014). The possible disruption and lower performance in the learning process (Oldfield et al., 2018) is a significant issue that does not advance the widening participation agenda. There is a raft of evidence associated with students' underperformance in HE due to factors such as unmet or unrealistic expectations, competing demands and teaching quality (Chipchase et al., 2017). Further, accelerated degrees will impact the quality time provided by the educators. As Barnett (2014) contends, students under pressure would not grasp the knowledge being sought and engage in the necessary independent learning which is essential for intellectual growth. The policy can have significant consequences locally and internationally as the UK continues to push for its widening participation agenda as well as maintain its position as one of the top three destinations for international students.

Finally, it is our opinion that the introduction of compressed degrees is a contested field. As such it should be subject to debate involving an interagency forum to bring together government, policymakers and those directly involved in teaching and learning in higher education, e.g. teachers, HE administrators, mental health support staff and student representatives. The Act has been passed by Parliament but its implementation should remain the subject of further debate. Institutions have a duty to protect the wellbeing of students and the quality of our education system. In this perspective the debate about the two-year degrees must go on and mature and substantial impact studies undertaken before any final template is further popularised.

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